

A World of Comparisons. Dynamics, Contexts, Perspectives

February 3 -4, 2011

Organizers:

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Conference Draft

The conference brings together leading scholars of different research fields to discuss a new, but not yet well-established topic of research. The conference is closely connected with a proposal prepared by a group of scholars from Bielefeld for the Excellence Initiative by the German Government. The proposal's title is: "Communicating Comparisons. From the Onset of Modernity to World Society". Both the conference and the proposal favour an interdisciplinary approach and a historical long-term perspective. With this conference, we hope to get new empirical impulses and theoretical insights into the causes and effects of comparisons from the Middle Ages to our own era.

The ubiquity of public comparisons is an everyday experience. Yet, the social sciences have so far failed to address comparisons as a communicative phenomenon in its own right. Although comparisons lie in the background of many historical and sociological studies, the social significance of comparisons has remained profoundly underestimated both in theory and in empirical research.

The general assumption that should serve as a thread for the conference is that comparisons as a communicative phenomenon have the power to create social order, and it seems that this power is grounded in the structure of comparison itself. Comparisons combine the assumption of sameness (of given objects in at least one respect) with the observation of difference. Ranking law schools, for instance, implies that we first classify them, irrespective of their diversity, as institutions of higher education. Then, an indicator is needed in order to detect their differences. Whether phenomena are comparable or not is a matter of social negotiation, not a natural fact.

Bearing in mind these general assumptions, the four sessions of the conference intend to analyse the concrete causes and results of comparisons in various areas of society and across different periods of time. We will also look at the changing theoretical implications underlying comparisons. To examine different areas of society in a long-term perspective, as the sessions do, is essential because it is most likely that the effects and implications of "comparisons" differ from field to field and epoch to epoch.

In the eyes of students and professors, there have always been important and less important universities (section I). Some universities like Oxford for instance, have been able to establish and maintain a high reputation throughout the centuries. But in which way were medieval universities compared, when there were no Nobel prize winners you could count? And does the name of a university, its history and 'honour' really play no role in modern university ranking? Do we find more similarities or more differences when looking at how universities were compared in premodern and modern times?

Comparing different religions or different cultures has a very long tradition (section II). Disputations between Jews and Christians during the Middle Ages and between the various Early Modern confessions have always attracted historical research. The same is true of travel accounts, especially those who inform “the West” about the Middle or Far East. Do we get other insights into the way these disputations and accounts function when focussing on ‘comparisons’? We assume that cross-cultural comparisons have played a decisive role in the emergence of world society. What comparative criteria were used in premodern travel accounts and to what extent intercultural comparisons have contributed to the growing awareness of being part of the world as whole? To what extent did the mode and the consequences of comparing change with the “birth of the modern world” and the growing inequality between the world regions since 1800? And what kinds of comparisons were assumed by post-war modernization paradigms and how do institutionalized worldwide comparisons, e.g., international statistics and rankings, contribute to the diffusion of global models and institutions?

That numbers, tables and statistics form part of systematic comparisons is a relative recent phenomenon (section III). Their use seems to go hand in hand with the formation of the modern state and the extension of markets during the 18th and 19th centuries. The attractiveness of comparing objects by numbers has grown ever since. Statistics and numbers almost appear to be the medium in which comparisons are communicated today. Was it just an accident that number-based forms of comparisons emerged together with new institutions at the beginning of modernity? Why are comparisons based on numbers so widespread, so “successful”? What are the problems and limits of translating qualitative observations into tables and statistics? And why are quantitative comparisons more likely to attain a global scope than comparisons based on images or language?

That the idea of equality of all human beings, a hallmark of modernity, is connected with comparisons in a number of ways, has largely been overlooked in social sciences so far (section IV). It can be presumed that practices of comparison have inspired the construction of equality norms, just as equality norms encourage comparisons. The introduction of equality norms, e.g. in the legal realm, with respect to citizens or even all human beings, seems to react to certain types of cultural or social comparisons, and, once introduced, their underlying assumption of comparability seems to remove barriers that formerly effectively blocked the making of comparisons (such as entrenched social hierarchies). Comparisons using all sorts of criteria seem all of a sudden feasible. Do comparisons indeed develop a self-enforcing dynamic fostering the spread of equality norms as well as of further comparisons? We also assume that the dynamic triggered by equality norms and comparisons is met with resistance. Sometimes, people claim that their values and ways of living are incomparable, pointing out to the incommensurability of their (regional) culture or religion (“Chineseness”, Christian or Islamic values). Do these claims interrupt or just temporarily affect the form and diffusion of equality norms and comparisons?

The conference will end with a final discussion which will give us the opportunity to summarize the analyses presented in the papers and statements. Furthermore, we hope to synthesise the various aspects of the social phenomenon of comparison on a more theoretical level.

Program

Thursday, 3 February

9:30 Ulrike Davy, Bielefeld: Welcome address
 Willibald Steinmetz, Bielefeld: Introduction

Section I:

Between status and ranking: Comparing comparisons of medieval and modern universities

Moderator: Veronika Tacke, Bielefeld

- 10:00 Frank Rexroth, Göttingen:
The notion of conceptual differences between academic disciplines (12th - 14th centuries)
- 10:30 Linda Wedlin, Uppsala:
Ranking of modern universities: How global comparisons matter
- 11:00 Coffee
- 11:30 Statement: Franz-J. Arlinghaus, Bielefeld
- 11:45 Discussion
- 12:45 Lunch

Section II:

Comparing religions and cultures in premodern and modern times

Moderator: Peter Schuster, Bielefeld

- 14:15 Thomas Lentes, Münster:
Comparing religions in the Middle Ages
- 14:45 Stefan Brakensiek, Duisburg-Essen:
European Travel Reports on Persia around 1700
- 15:15 Coffee
- 15:45 Statement: Willibald Steinmetz, Bielefeld
- 16:00 Discussion
- 17:00 Coffee

Friday, 4 February

Section III:

Governance by numbers: Making comparisons quantitative

Moderator: Michael Huber, Bielefeld

- 9:30 Lars Behrisch, Utrecht:
Inventing statistics in the 18th century
- 10:00 Michael Power, London:
Accounting and Finance
- 10:30 Coffee
- 11:00 Statement: Nils Brunsson, Uppsala
- 11:15 Discussion
- 12:15 Lunch

Section IV:

Comparisons and modernization

Moderator: Angelika Epple, Bielefeld

- 13:45 Martin Geyer, Munich:
Constructing the modern world through comparisons. Social Indicators and modernization paradigms of the post war period
- 14:15 Statement: John Meyer, Stanford
- 14:30 Discussion
- 15:30 Coffee
- 16:00 Final discussion
Moderator: Thomas Welskopp, Bielefeld
- 17:00 Coffee / End of Conference